

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1

BOSTON GLOBE
27 May 1984

Assad's brother reportedly exiled

By William Beecher
Globe Staff

WASHINGTON - Western intelligence sources say Rifaat Assad, the brother of ailing Syrian President Hafez Assad, is about to go into exile, the first victim in a succession struggle that has been festering for six months.

The sources say Rifaat Assad appears to have failed in his bid to be designated successor. Soviet-bloc diplomats say they agree with this assessment.

But a number of analysts say they do not rule out a comeback if military leaders united only by their opposition to Rifaat fight among themselves about who should become the heir apparent.

Well-placed sources say the rivalry between Rifaat, the commander of a 30,000-man force in Damascus, and senior commanders of virtually all the rest of the armed forces, had to be resolved quickly because President Assad has been reluctant to leave for Switzerland for needed medical treatment while the chances of a coup were considerable. Rifaat's exile is seen as diminishing that prospect.

The succession struggle in Syria is important because of Syria's commanding influence in the internal affairs of both Lebanon and the Palestine Liberation Organization, because of its continuing confrontation with Israel, because of its support for Iran in its war with Iraq, because of its Soviet connection and because of its aspirations to lead the Arab world.

President Assad suffered a heart attack last November and reportedly is in failing health. He is widely viewed as one of the shrewdest, toughest leaders in the Mideast. Before he seized leadership 14 years ago, Syria for years was buffeted by frequent coups.

Until recently, Rifaat Assad was considered the odds-on favorite to step up when his brother either died or had to step down because of ill health.

But Rifaat is hated and distrusted by his fellow officers for being arrogant, corrupt and brutal. For example, his special Defense Companies took revenge for rebellious Moslem Brotherhood activity in Hama two years ago by leveling much of the ancient quarter of the city with tanks and artillery. An estimated 10,000 to 20,000 people were killed in the operation.

Comeback not ruled out

Western analysts caution that although Rifaat may have lost the first round, he may not have lost the war. They point out that in 1979 he had to leave Syria because, as one of them put it, "He lost out in a power play. But later on he returned and increased his power."

Sources say that in late April Rifaat sent several wives and children to safety in Europe. They went with large retinues of servants and security guards giving the impression they are prepared for a long exile.

Following the president's heart attack, intense jockeying took place among the rivals for the heir-apparent role. Analysts believe Rifaat was spurred in part because he was excluded from the five-man council that ruled during the president's absence.

Last December, Rifaat tried to burnish his public image by appearing on Syrian television and having his posters put up all over Damascus. They were torn down and then put up again. Unusual troop movements in and around the capital followed with some tense confrontations between combat-equipped pro-Rifaat and anti-Rifaat units.

Until that time, except for being seen as his brother's protection against coups from the army and with a regional position in the ruling Baath Party, Rifaat Assad had no formal authority from which he could lay claim to the presidency.

Fears were expressed in Damascus last winter that a skirmish between rival military units could suddenly lead to a coup attempt by one faction or another.

Three vice presidents

In March, President Assad apparently moved to finesse the problem by naming three vice presidents - Rifaat, Foreign Minister Abdul Halim Khaddam and Baath leader Zuhair Masharqa.

This gave Rifaat a senior position from which he could legitimately claim leadership if his brother passed from the scene.

The army is the key to power in Syria, and until his heart attack, President Assad worked 12 to 14 hours a day deciding on all promotions and transfers of officers. But that changed after he returned from the hospital, and a small council was named to handle such questions.

Analysts say the struggle between Rifaat and his rivals then moved into high gear, each side trying to promote its men and purge other officers.

Among the key rivals for power, sources say, are Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas and Chief of Staff Hikmat Shehabi.

Soviet-bloc diplomats say that regardless of who succeeds President Assad, and they favor Tlas, they don't think fundamental relations between Damascus and Moscow will change because Syria has no other source for advanced weapons for its confrontation with Israel.

"Syria is no Egypt," one diplomat said, implicitly referring to the decision by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to kick out the Soviets and rely instead on US and other Western military, economic and diplomatic backing.